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ABSTRACT

By understanding why children engage in name calling and responding thoughtfully to such events, parents and teachers can help both the name caller and the victim to grow in their abilities to understand themselves and others. In their own social interactions, children mirror the negative evaluations they have observed. Left unchecked, such beliefs and attitudes can become the foundation of life-long prejudices. Name calling doesn't have to be part of childhood. Children can learn that words do hurt. When a child has been hurt by someone else's language, it is important for the child not to internalize the negative messages he or she has received. The parent or teacher should assure the child that the name caller was wrong. If name calling or exclusion is a frequent problem in school, teachers can implement character-education lessons that help all the children in the class be more sensitive to and accepting of each other. Those who work with children must be sure that they model appropriate behavior and they don't ignore the use of bigoted language by other adults so that children can learn that they can help overcome racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry. (SLD)

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Hurtful Words:

Addressing Name Calling at School and Home

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Hurtful Words: Addressing Name Calling at Schools and Home

"Fatty!" "Four-eyes!" "Stupid!" "Chink!" "We don't want you to play!" Parents and teachers are usually distressed to hear children use such insensitive and hurtful words. By understanding why children engage in name calling and responding thoughtfully to such events, we can help both the name caller and the victim to grow in their abilities to understand themselves and others.

How Do Children Get These Ideas?

Children grow up observing the world around them. As they observe the world they try to make sense of it. For example, a child, after repeated experiences of being told that he is a boy, that Daddy and brother Jaime are boys, and that Joey across the street is a boy begins to equate the term "boy" with people who have short hair, don't wear dresses and the like. Depending upon his experiences he may also learn that boys must be tough, don't cook, and should never cry. He may observe that boys who don't fit this description are teased or ridiculed. At the dinner table he hears a visitor say disparagingly, "I can't believe Samuel's parents haven't cut his hair, he looks like a sissy." When Samuel's parents don't counter this view, Samuel learns that boys who are like girls in some way may be openly disparaged.

A child creates images and develops opinions about all sorts of groups of people from watching interactions in his or her world. Given the child's observations, he or she learns not only a name or label for a group of people (for example, black, white, Latino, girl, poor, Catholic, athlete) but a set of beliefs and attitudes about this group. (Certain people and characteristics are valued and respected; others are not.) The information children collect and the attitudes they form about various groups of people can come from personal experiences, observing other people's comments and interactions, and from the media (television, movies, books, and magazines). In their own social interactions children mirror the negative evaluations they have observed. Left unchecked, such beliefs and attitudes can become the foundation for life-long prejudices.

Here are two examples of how young children start using the information they gain about various groups of people. 1) Sylvi has noticed that all the heroines on her favorite videos are thin and have Barbie-doll figures (Cinderella, Belle, Pocohontas, Anastasia, Mulan). She observes that other people in her life talk a lot about not getting fat. Sylvi is learning that being thin is good and makes you

attractive to others. When Erica wants to be the beautiful Cinderella in their dramatic play Sylvi says, "You can't be Cinderella, you're fat." 2) Michael observes that whenever his uncle visits he makes disparaging comments about the large Jewish population in the community. Michael, without any other information available to him, begins to believe that being Jewish is not valued. When he and a friend are angry at another neighborhood child who has interfered in their game he calls him a Jew and tells him to go away. His friend echoes this pronouncement.

Regardless of parents' and teachers' efforts to respect differences, children will be exposed to people who judge others based on such factors as race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, ability, gender, or attractiveness. If we are to raise sensitive and respectful children, it is up to us to directly counter and discuss the messages children pick up from other people around them, events, and the media. It is not enough to simply avoid such behavior on our own part. We must give children clear messages that we find it unacceptable when other people act in a hurtful discriminatory way.

Isn't Name Calling Just Part of Childhood?

Name calling doesn't have to be part of childhood. Children need to learn that words do hurt -- every bit as much as being physically hit. In fact the memory of being called names and the hurt that is felt is often carried far into adulthood. Thus, the saying, "Sticks and stones may break your bones but names will never hurt me," is a falsehood. You can help children understand that while words don't cut or bruise the skin, they do hurt people on the inside where it doesn't show. If your child or student engages in name calling, talk to them about the circumstances under which the name calling occurred and encourage the child to find another way to express his or her anger or hurt when he or she is upset. Explain that name calling hurts people and doesn't help fix problems that arise with others.

Why Are Children Likely to Use Name Calling or Hurtful Words?

When a child engages in name calling or the use of hurtful words it can be helpful to consider why he or she has done so. The most benign reason would be that he or she was simply ignorant of the impact of his or her words. Children may be uncomfortable or curious when they see people who look or act differently from themselves and they may use derogatory words to describe the difference. "How come that kid looks weird?" may be blurted out when first seeing a child who has a physical difference; or "He looks stupid!" might be stated when first seeing a young

man with dreadlocks. Clearly this is a perfect opportunity to talk about differences. Children need to realize that people are not all alike and that we can enjoy learning about how people are different. It is helpful to explain to children that we often think people are strange just because what they do or how they look is unfamiliar to us. We don't think what we do or how we look is strange because that is what we are used to. To avoid others being hurt, we can tell children to ask us quietly or privately about differences that they observe in the people around them.

Name calling is often used because a child is angry with another child or adult. They want to punish or get a reaction from the offender. Because they have been good observers of the culture they call the offender a name that they know carries the power to hurt. Young children may use names that do not even match the characteristics of the child whom they are trying to hurt. For example, a child will refer to someone using an ethnic putdown that does not even match the child's ethnicity. The child knows that the word can be used to hurt others and so he or she uses it without understanding the meaning. In such instances it is important for the parent or teacher to focus on the use of name calling to hurt others rather than to focus on the inaccuracy of the term. Let the child know that name calling is unacceptable and help him or her to think of other ways he or she could address the problem or deal with his or her feelings.

Children will engage in name calling to make themselves feel powerful and important. The child calls someone else "stupid" to mask his or her own insecurities and to show others that he or she is better than the victim. Sometimes a child will put another child down with a name to mask his or her own hurt at being left out or rejected. Acknowledge the child's feelings and help the child to come up with alternative ways to interact. A parent or teacher might say, "It sounds like you are (hurt, angry, upset) but name calling is not okay. What could you do differently next time you feel this way?"

Some children will engage in name calling to gain acceptance by others. If high-status friends use put-down words, the child does the same so as to feel accepted by others and to show support for friends. Caring adults can explain to a child that it is not okay to put others down even if friends do it. Help the child to empathize with the victim. Ask the child how he or she thinks the victim of the name calling felt? Ask if he or she felt good about his or her own actions? Ask what else he or she could have done. Encourage the child to act differently in the

future. Role play situations with the child to give practice saying things like, "I don't like name calling. It's not playing fair," or "Just leave him alone."

Correcting a Child's Thinking

Name calling can involve naive or illogical thinking on the part of the child. If a young child puts down whole groups of people, it is important to carefully address his or her thinking. You want to correct the thinking without making the child feel defensive. For example, a father has just been confronted by a very angry 6-year-old daughter who says, "I don't like Wu, she's Chinese." (This statement has occurred after his daughter has clearly had a rather upsetting play date with her friend Wu.) The father might respond with some of the following ideas: "I know you are angry at Wu. But when you say 'I don't like Wu, she's Chinese,' it sounds like you know all the people in the world who are from China and you don't like any of them. You can only like or dislike people you know. There are people you don't like to play with because they do things you don't like, but being from China has nothing to do with it. Some boys and some girls are not fun to play with. It is okay to say that you are angry with your friend Wu but we don't judge people we don't know."

What Do I Say to the Child Who has been Called Names?

When a child has been put down by someone else's language it is important for the child not to internalize the negative message he or she received. The message is, "You are a bad or unacceptable person because you are _____ (dark skinned, poor, Jewish)." Talk with the child and assure him or her that it was wrong for the other child to say such things. Help the child to understand that some children have not yet learned that calling people names because of the way someone looks or because of abilities or skin color is wrong. You may explain that children call people names because they are angry, confused, or unsure of themselves and they have not learned better ways to deal with their feelings. You may also point out that the accused child's thinking needs to be corrected. For example, it is silly and unfair to hurt people or not like them because of how they look, their homes, what they wear, or their physical abilities. Help the child to see the problem as belonging to the name caller not to him or her.

If name calling or exclusion is a frequent problem at school, teachers can implement character-education lessons that can help all the children in the class be more sensitive to and accepting of each other. There are numerous children's books

that can be used by parents or teachers to open discussions on this topic. Here are a few titles that should be easy to find in most school or public libraries: Amazing Grace by M. Hoffman, Crowboy by T. Yashima, Chrysanthemum by K. Henkes, The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss, and You Look Ridiculous, Said the Rhinoceros to the Hippopotamus by B. Waber. Some excellent teacher books that share activities for reducing bias in the classroom also exist. Some favorites are: Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children by L. Derman-Sparks, Open Minds to Equality by N. Schniedewind and E. Davidson, and Words Can Hurt by B. J. Thomson.

Practicing What We Preach

As we work with children to be respectful of others we must make sure that we model this behavior. If adults use bigoted language around you make sure you don't ignore it. Children need to know that such behavior is unacceptable even when it comes from an adult. A calmly stated response such as, "Please don't use such language around me or my children," "I'm uncomfortable with that word because it is hurtful to others," or "That kind of joke is not funny to me," should get the point across. Later, you may want to share why the word or words were not respectful of others. If a child or student asks why a person would say such a thing, you might say, "A lot of wrong ideas about people have been causing problems for a long time. It's sad when people make others feel bad because of the color of their skin (or religion, or weight). People grow up with these ideas and it's hard to get rid of them. But when a lot of children like you grow up, fewer and fewer people will believe such things. In the mean time we can help others learn that it isn't fair or kind to say such things." This kind of message helps children know that they can help overcome racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry.